

PETUNIAS—THAT'S FOR REMEMBRANCE

By Dorothy Canfield

ILLUSTRATIONS BY E. M. ASHE



It was a place to which, as a dreamy, fanciful child escaping from nurse-maid and governess, Virginia had liked to climb on hot summer afternoons. She had spent many hours, lying on the grass in the shade of the dismantled house, looking through the gaunt, uncovered rafters of the barn at the white clouds, like stepping-stones in the broad blue river of sky flowing between the mountain walls.

Older people of the summer colony called it forlorn and desolate—the deserted farm, lying high on the slope of Hemlock Mountain—but to the child there was a charm about the unbroken silence which brooded over the little clearing. The sun shone down warmly on the house's battered shell and through the stark skeleton of the barn. The white birches, strange sylvan denizens of door and barn-yard, stood shaking their delicate leaves as if announcing sweetly that the kind forest would cover all the wounds of human neglect, and soon everything would be as though man had not lived. And everywhere grew the thick, strong, glistening grass, covering even the threshold with a cushion on which the child's foot fell as noiselessly as a shadow. It used to seem to her that nothing could ever have happened in this breathless spot.

Now she was a grown woman, she told herself, twenty-three years old and had had, she often thought, as full a life as any one of her age could have. Her college course had been varied with vacations in Europe; she had had one season in society; she was just back from a trip around the world. Her busy, absorbing life had given her no time to revisit the narrow green valley where she had spent so many of her childhood's holidays. But now a whim for self-analysis, a desire to learn if the old glamour about the lovely enchanted region still existed for her weary, sophisticated maturity, had made her break exacting social engagements and sent her back alone, from the city, to see how the old valley looked in the spring.

Her disappointment was acute. The first impression and the one which remained with her, coloring painfully all the vistas of dim woodland aisles and sunlit brooks, was of the meagreness and meanness of the desolate lives lived in this paradise. This was a fact she had not noticed as a child, accepting the country people as she did all other incomprehensible elders. They had not seemed to her to differ noticeably from her delicate, æsthetic mother, lying in lavender silk negligées on wicker couches, reading the latest book of Mallarmé, or from her competent, rustling aunt, guiding the course of the summer colony's social life with firm hands. There was as yet no summer colony, this week in May. Even the big hotel was not open. Virginia was lodged in the house of one of the farmers. There was no element to distract her mind from the narrow, unlovely lives of the owners of that valley of beauty.

They were grinding away at their stupefyingly monotonous tasks as though the miracle of spring were not taking place before their eyes. They were absorbed in their barn-yards and kitchen sinks and bad cooking and worse dress-making. The very children, grimy little utilitarians like their parents, only went abroad in the flood of golden sunshine, in order to rifle the hill pastures of their wild strawberries. Virginia was no longer a child to ignore all this. It was an embittering, imprisoning thought from which she could not escape even in the most radiant vision of May woods. She was a woman now, with a trained mind which took in the saddening significance of these lives, not so much melancholy or tragic as utterly neutral, featureless, dun-colored. They weighed on her heart as she walked and drove about the lovely country they spoiled for her.

What a heavenly country it was! She compared it to similar valleys in Switzerland, in Norway, in Japan, and her own shone out pre-eminent with a thousand beauties of bold sky-line, of harmoniously "composed" distances, of exquisitely fairy-like detail of foreground. But oh! the



Drawn by E. M. Ashe.

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wooden packing-boxes of houses and the dreary lives they sheltered!

The Pritchard family, her temporary hosts, summed up for her the human life of the valley. There were two children, inarticulate, vacant-faced country children of eight and ten, out from morning till night in the sunny, upland pastures, but who could think of nothing but how many quarts of berries they had picked and what price could be exacted for them. There was Gran'ther Pritchard, a doddering, toothless man of seventy-odd, and his wife, a tall, lean, lame old woman with a crutch, who sat all through the meal-times, speechlessly staring at the stranger, with faded gray eyes. There was Mr. Pritchard and his son Joel, gaunt Yankees, toiling with fierce concentration to "get the crops in" after a late spring. Finally there was Mrs. Pritchard, worn and pale, passing those rose-colored spring days grubbing in her vegetable garden. And all of them silent, silent as the cattle they resembled. There had been during the first few days of her week's stay some vague attempts at conversation, but Virginia was soon aware that they had not the slightest rudiments of a common speech.

A blight was on even those faint manifestations of the æsthetic spirit which they had not killed out of their bare natures. The pictures in the house were bad beyond belief, and the only flowers were some petunias, growing in a pot, carefully tended by Grandma Pritchard. They bore a mass of blossoms of a terrible magenta, like a blow in the face to any one sensitive to color. It usually stood on the dining-table, which was covered with a red cloth. "Crimson! Magenta! It is no wonder they are lost souls!" cried the girl to herself.

On the last day of her week, even as she was trying to force down some food at the table thus decorated, she bethought herself of her old haunt of desolate peace on the mountain-side. She pushed away from the table with an eager, murmured excuse, and fairly ran out into the gold and green of the forest, a paradise lying hard by the pitiable little purgatory of the farm-house. As she fled along through the clean-growing maple-groves, through stretches of sunlit pastures, azure with bluets, through dark pines, red-carpeted by last year's needles, through the flickering, shadowy-patterned birches, she cried out to all this beauty to set

her right with the world of her fellows, to ease her heart of its burden of disdainful pity.

But there was no answer.

She reached the deserted clearing breathless, and paused to savor its slow, penetrating peace. The white birches now almost shut the house from view; the barn had wholly disappeared. From the finely proportioned old doorway of the house protruded a long, grayed, weather-beaten tuft of hay. The last utilitarian dishonor had befallen it. It had not even its old dignity of vacant desolation. She went closer and peered inside. Yes, hay . . . the scant cutting from the adjacent old meadows . . . had been piled high in the room which had been the gathering-place of the forgotten family life. She stepped in and sank down on it, struck by the far-reaching view from the window. As she lay looking out, the silence was as insistent as a heavy odor in the air.

The big white clouds lay like stepping-stones in the sky's blue river, just as when she was a child. Their silver-gleaming brightness blinded her. . . . "*Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh . . . warte nur . . . balde . . . ruhest . . . du . . .*" she began to murmur, and stopped, awed by the immensity of the hush about her. She closed her eyes, pillowed her head on her upthrown arms and sank into a wide, bright reverie, which grew dimmer and vaguer as the slow changeless hours filed by.

She did not know if it were from a doze, or but from this dreamy haze that she was awakened by the sound of voices outside the house, under the window by which she lay. There were the tones of a stranger and those of old Mrs. Pritchard, but now flowing on briskly with a volubility unrecognizable. Virginia sat up, hesitating. Were they only passing by, or stopping? Should she show herself or let them go on? In an instant the question was settled for her. It was too late. She would only shame them if they knew her there. She had caught her own name. They were talking of her.

"Well, you needn't," said the voice of Mrs. Pritchard. "You can just save your breath to cool your porridge. You can't get nothin' out'n her."

"But she's travelled 'round so much, seems's though . . ." began the other woman's voice.

"Don't it?" struck in old Mrs. Pritchard assentingly, "But 'tain't so!"



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The other was at a loss. "Do you mean she's stuck-up and won't answer you?" Mrs. Pritchard burst into a laugh, the great, resonant good-nature of which amazed Virginia. She had not dreamed that one of these sour, silent people could laugh like that. "No, *land* no, Abby! She's as soft-spoken as anybody could be, poor thing! She ain't got nothin' to say. That's all. Why, I can git more out'n any pack-peddler that's only been from here to Rutland and back than out'n her . . . and she's travelled all summer long for five years, she was tellin' us, and last year went around the world."

"Good land! Think of it!" cried the other, awe-struck. "China! An' Afriky! An' London!"

"That's the way we felt! That's the reason we let her come. There ain't no profit in one boarder, and we never take boarders, anyhow. But I thought 'twould be a chance for the young ones to learn something about how foreign folks lived." She broke again into her epic laugh. "Why, Abby, 'twould ha' made you die to see us the first few days she was there, tryin' to get somethin' out'n her. Italy, now . . . had she been there? 'Oh, yes, she *adored* Italy!'" Virginia flushed at the echo of her own exaggerated accent. "Well, we'd like to know somethin' 'bout Italy. What did they raise there? Honest, Abby, you'd ha' thought we'd hit her side th' head. She thought and she *thought*, and all she could say was 'olives.' Nothing else? 'Well, she'd never noticed anything else . . . oh, yes, lemons.' Well, that seemed kind o' queer vittles, but you can't never tell how foreigners git along, so we thought maybe they just lived off'n olives and lemons; and Joel he asked her how they raised 'em, and if they manured heavy or trusted to phosphate, and how long the trees took before they began to bear, and if they pruned much, and if they had the same trouble we do, come harvest time, to hire hands enough to git in th' crop."

She paused. The other woman asked, "Well, what did she say?"

The echoes rang again to the old woman's great laugh. "We might as well ha' asked her 'bout the back side of th' moon! So we gave up on olives and lemons! Then Eben he asked her 'bout taxes there. Were they on land mostly and were they high and

who 'sessed 'em and how 'bout school tax. Did the state pay part o' that? You see town meetin' being so all tore up every year 'bout taxes, Eben he thought 'twould be a chance to hear how other folks did, and maybe learn somethin'. Good land, Abby, I've set there and 'most died, tryin' to keep from yellin' right out with laugh to see our folks tryin' to learn somethin' 'bout foreign parts from that woman that's travelled in 'em steady for five years. I bet she was blindfolded and gagged and had cotton in her ears the hull time she was there!"

"Didn't she tell you anythin' 'bout taxes?"

"Taxes? You'd ha' thought 'twas bumble-bees' hind legs we was askin' 'bout! She ackshilly seemed s'prised to be asked. Land! What had she ever thought 'bout such triflin' things as taxes. She didn't know how they was taxed in Italy, or if they was . . . nor anywhere else. That what it come down to, every time. She didn't know! She didn't know what kind of schools they had, nor what the roads was made of, nor who made 'em. She couldn't tell you what hired men got, nor *any* wages, nor what girls that didn't get married did for a living, nor what rent they paid, nor how they 'mused themselves, nor how much land was worth, nor if they had factories, nor if there was any lumberin' done, nor how they managed to keep milk in such awful hot weather without ice. Honest, Abby, she couldn't even say if the houses had cellars or not. Why it come out she never was *in* a real house that anybody lived in . . . only hotels. She hadn't got to know a single real person that b'longed there. Of course she never found out anything 'bout how they lived. Her mother was there, she said, and her aunt, and that Bilson family that comes to th' village summers, an' the Goodriches an' the Phippses an' the . . . oh, sakes alive, you know that *same* old crowd that rides 'roun' here summers and thinks to be sociable by sayin' how nice an' yellow your oats is blossom'n! You could go ten times 'roun' the world with them and know less 'bout what folks is like than when you started. When I heard 'bout them being there, I called Eben and Joel and Em'ly off and I says, 'Now, don't pester that poor do-less critter with questions any more. How much do the summer folks down to th' vil-

lage know 'bout the way we live?' Well, they burst out laughin', of course. 'Well, then,' I says, 'tis plain to be seen that all they do in winter is to go off to some foreign part and do the same as here,' so I says to them, same's I said to you, Abby, a while back, that they'd better save their breath to cool their porridge. But its awful solemn eatin' now, without a word spoke."

The other woman laughed. "Why, you don't have to talk 'bout foreign parts or else keep still, do ye?"

"Oh, it's just so 'bout everythin'. We heard she'd been in Washington last winter, so Eben he brisked up and tried her on politics. Well, she'd never heard of direct primaries, they're raisin' such a holler 'bout in York State; she didn't know what th' 'nsurgent senators are up to near as much as we did, and to judge by the way she looked, she'd only just barely heard of th' tariff." The word was pronounced with true New England reverence. "Then we tried bringin' up children, and lumberin' an' roads, an' cookin', an' crops, an' stocks, an' wages, an' schools, an' gardenin', but we couldn't touch bottom nowhere. Never a word to be had out'n her. So we give up, and now we just sit like stotin' bottles, an' eat—an' do our visitin' with each other odd minutes afterward."

"Why, she don't look to be half-witted," said the other.

"She ain't!" cried Mrs. Pritchard with emphasis. "She's got as good a head-piece, natchilly, as anybody. I remember her when she was a young one. It's the fool way they're brung up! Everythin' that's any fun or intrust, they hire somebody else to do it for 'em. Here she is a great strappin' woman of twenty-two or three, with nothing in the world to do but to trapse off 'cross the fields from mornin' to night—an' nobody to need her there nor here, nor anywhere. No wonder she looks peaked. Sometimes when I see her set and stare off, so sort o' dull and hopeless, I'm so sorry for her I could cry! Good land! I'd as lief hire somebody to chew my vittles for me and give me the dry cud to live off of as do the way those kind of folks do."

The distant call of a steam-whistle, silvered by the great distance into a flute-like note, interrupted her. "That's the milk-train, whistling for the Millbrook crossin'," she said. "We must be thinkin' of goin' home before long. Where be those young

ones?" She raised her voice in a call as unexpectedly strong and vibrant as her laugh. "Susie! Eddie! Did they answer? I'm gittin' that hard o' hearin' 'tis hard for me to make out."

"Yes, they hollered back," said the other. "An' I see 'em comin' through the pasture yonder. I guess they got their pails full by the way they carry 'em."

"That's good," said Mrs. Pritchard with satisfaction. "They can get twenty-five cents a quart hulled, off'n summer folks. They're savin' up to help Joel go to Middletown college in the fall."

"They think a lot o' Joel, don't they?" commented the other.

"Oh, the Pritchards has always been a family that knew how to set store by their own folks," said the old woman proudly, "and Joel he'll pay 'em back as soon as he gets ahead a little."

The children had evidently now come up, for Virginia heard congratulations over the berries and exclamations over their sun-flushed cheeks. "Why, Susie, you look like a pickled beet in your face. Set down, child, an' cool off. Grandma called you an' Eddie down to tell you an old-timey story."

There was an outbreak of delighted cries from the children and Mrs. Pritchard said deprecatingly, "You know, Abby, there never was children yet that wasn't crazy 'bout old-timey stories. I remember how I used to hang onto Aunt Debby's skirts and beg her to tell me some more."

"The story I'm goin' to tell you is about this Great-aunt Debby," she announced formally to her auditors, "when she was 'bout fourteen years old and lived up here in this very house, pretty soon after th' R'volution. There was only just a field or two cleared off 'round it then, and all over th' mounting the woods were as black with pines and spruce as any cellar. Great-aunt Debby was the oldest one of five children and my grandfather—your great-great-grandfather—was the youngest. In them days there wa'n't but a few families in the valley and they lived far apart, so when Great-aunt Debby's father got awful sick a few days after he'd been away to get some grist ground, Aunt Debby's mother had to send her 'bout six' miles through th' woods to the nearest house—it stood where the old Perkins barn is now. The man come back with Debby, but as soon as he saw great-

grandfather he give one yell—'small-pox!'—and lit out for home. Folks was tur'ble afraid of it then an' he had seven children of his own an' nobody for 'em to look to if he died, so you couldn't blame him none. They was all like that then, every fam'ly just barely holdin' on an' scratchin' for dear life.

"Well, he spread the news and the next day, while Debby was helpin' her mother nurse her father the best she could, somebody called her over toward th' woods. They made her stand still 'bout three rods from 'em and shouted to her that the best they could do was to see that the fam'ly had vittles enough. The neighbors would cook up a lot and leave it every day in the fence corner and Debby could come and git it.

"That was the way they fixed it. Aunt Debby said they was awful faithful and good 'bout it and never failed, rain or shine, to leave a lot of the best stuff they could git in them days. But beforelong she left some of it there, to show they didn't need so much, because they wasn't so many to eat.

"First, Aunt Debby's father died. Her mother and she dug the grave in th' corner of th' clearin', down there where I'm pointin'. Aunt Debby said she couldn't never forget how her mother looked as she said a prayer before they shovelled the dirt back in. Then the two of 'em took care of the cow and tried to get in a few garden seeds while they nursed one of the children—the boy that was next to Debby. That turned out to be small-pox, of course, and he died and they buried him alongside his father. Then the two youngest girls, twins they was, took sick, and before they died Aunt Debby's mother fell over in a faint while she was tryin' to spade up the garden. Aunt Debby got her into the house and put her to bed. She never said another thing, but just died without so much as knowin' Debby. She and the twins went the same day, and Debby buried 'em in one grave.

"It took her all day to dig it, she said. They was afraid of wolves in them days and had to have their graves deep. The baby, the one that was to be my grandfather, played 'round while she was diggin', and she had to stop to milk the cow and git his meals for him. She got the bodies over to the grave, one at a time, draggin' 'em on the wood-sled. When she was ready to shovel the dirt back in, 'twas gettin' to be twilight, and she said the thrushes were beginnin' to

sing—she made the baby kneel down and she got on her knees beside him and took hold of his hand to say a prayer. She was just about wore out, as you can think, and scared to death, and she'd never known any prayer, anyhow. All she could think to say was 'Lord—Lord—Lord!' And she made the baby say it, over and over. I guess 'twas a good enough prayer too. When I married and come up here to live, seems as though I never heard the thrushes begin to sing in the evening without I looked down there and could almost see them two on their knees.

"Well, there she was, fourteen years old, with a two-year-old baby to look out for, and all the rest of the family gone as though she'd dreamed 'em. She was sure she and little Eddie—you're named for him, Eddie, and don't you never forget it—would die, of course, like the others, but she wa'n't any hand to give up till she had to, and she wanted to die last, so to look out for the baby. So when she took sick she fought the small-pox just like a wolf, she used to tell us. She had to live, to take care of Eddie. She gritted her teeth and *wouldn't* die, though, as she always said, 'twould ha' been enough sight more comfortable than to live through what she did.

"Some folks nowadays say it couldn't ha' been small-pox she had, or she couldn't ha' managed. I don't know 'bout that. I guess 'twas plenty bad enough, anyhow. She was out of her head a good share of th' time, but she never forgot to milk the cow and give Eddie his meals. She used to fight up on her knees (there was a week when she couldn't stand without fallin' over in a faint) and then crawl out to the cow-shed and sit down flat on the ground and reach up to milk. One day the fever was so bad she was clear crazy and she thought angels in silver shoes come right out there, in the manure an' all, and milked for her and held the cup to Eddie's mouth.

"An' one night she thought somebody, with a big black cape on, come and stood over her with a knife. She riz up in bed and told him to 'git out! She'd have to stay to take care of the baby!' And she hit at the knife so fierce she knocked it right out'n his hand. Then she fainted away agin. She didn't come to till mornin', and when she woke up she knew she was goin' to live. She always said her hand was all bloody that morning from a big cut in it, and she

used to show us the scar—a big one 'twas, too. But I guess most likely that come from somethin' else. Folks was awful superstitious in them days, and Aunt Debby was always kind o' queer.

"Well, an' so she did live and got well, though she never grew a mite from that time. A little wizened-up thing she was, always; but I tell you folks 'round here thought a nawful lot of Aunt Debby! And, Eddie, if you'll believe it, never took the sickness at all. They say, sometimes, babies don't.

"They got a fam'ly to come and work the farm for 'em, and Debby she took care of her little brother, same as she always had. And he grew up and got married and come to live in this house and Aunt Debby lived with him. They did set great store by each other! Grandmother used to laugh and say grandfather and Aunt Debby didn't need no words to talk together. I was eight, goin' on nine—why, Susie, just your age—when Aunt Debby died. I remember as well the last thing she said. Somebody asked her if she was afraid. She looked down over the covers—I can see her now, like a old baby she looked, so little and so light on the big feather-bed, and she said, 'Is a grain o' wheat scared when you drop it in the ground?' I always thought that wa'n't such a bad thing for a child to hear said.

"She'd wanted to be buried there beside the others and grandfather did it so. While he was alive he took care of the graves and kept 'em in good order; and after I married and come here to live I did. But I'm gettin' on now, and I want you young folks should know 'bout it and do it after I'm gone.

"Now, here, Susie, take this pot of petunias and set it out on the head of the grave that's got a stone over it. And if you're ever inclined to think you have a hard time, just you remember Aunt Debby and shut your teeth and *hang on!* If you tip the pot bottom-side up, and knock on it with a stone, it'll all slip out easy. Now go along with you. We've got to be starting for home soon."

There was a brief pause and then the cheerful voice went on: "If there's any flower I do despise, it's petunias! But 'twas Aunt Debby's 'special favorite, so I always start a pot real early and have it in blossom when her birthday comes 'round."

By the sound she was struggling heavily to her feet. "Yes, do, for goodness' sakes,

haul me up, will ye? I'm as stiff as a old horse. I don't know what makes me so rheumatically. My folks ain't, as a general thing."

There was so long a silence that the girl inside the house wondered if they were gone, when Mrs. Pritchard's voice began again: "I do like to come up here! It minds me of him an' me livin' here when we was young. We had a good time of it!"

"I never could see," commented the other, "how you managed when he went away t' th' war."

"Oh, I did the way you do when you *have* to! I'd felt he ought to go, you know, as much as he did, so I was willin' to put in my best licks. An' I was young too—twenty-three—and only two of the children born then—and I was as strong as a ox. I never minded the work any! 'Twas the days after battles, when we couldn't get no news, that was the bad part. Why, I could go to the very spot, over there where the butternut tree stands—'twas our garden then—where I heard he was killed at Gettysburg."

"What did you do?" asked the other.

"I went on hoein' my beans. There was the two children to be looked out for, you know. But I ain't mindin' tellin' you that I can't look at a bean-row since without gettin' so sick to my stomach and feelin' the goose-pimples start all over me."

"How did you hear 'twan't so?"

"Why, I was gettin' in the hay—up there where the oaks stand was our hay-field then. I remember how sick the smell of the hay made me, and when the sweat run down into my eyes I was glad to feel 'em smart and sting—well, Abby, you just wait till you hear your Nathan'l is shot through the head and you'll know how I was—well, all of a sudden—somebody took the fork out'n my hand an'—an' said—'here, you drive an' I'll pitch'—and there—'twas—'twas—"

"Why Grandma Pritchard! You're—"

"No I ain't, either! I ain't such a fool, I hope! Why, see me cry like a old numskull! Ain't it ridic'lous how you can talk 'bout deaths and buryin's all right, and can't tell of how somebody come back from the grave without—where in th' nation is my handkerchief! Why, Abby, things ain't never looked the same to me from that minute on. I tell you—I tell you—I *was* real glad to see him!

"Good land, what time o' day do you

suppose it can be? Susie! Eddie! Come, git your berries and start home!"

The two voices began to sound more faintly as the old woman's crutch rang on the stones. "Well, Abby, when I come up here and remember how I farmed it alone for four years, I say to myself that 'twan't only th' men that set the slaves free. Them that stayed to home was allowed to have their share in the good—" The syllables blurred into an indistinguishable hum and there fell again upon the house its old mantle of silence.

As if aroused by this from an hypnotic spell, the girl on the hay sat up suddenly, pressing her hands over her eyes; but she did not shut out a thousand thronging visions. There was not a sound but the loud throbbing of the pulses at her temples; but never again could there be silence for her in that spot. The air was thick with murmurs which beat against her ears. She was trem-

bling as she slipped down from the hay and, walking unsteadily to the door, stood looking half-wildly out into the haunted twilight.

The faint sound of the brook rose liquid in the quiet evening air.

There where the butternut tree stood, had been the garden!

The white birches answered with a rustling stir in all their lightly poised leaves.

Up there, where the oaks were, had been the hay-field!

The twilight darkened. Through the forest, black on the crest of the overhanging mountain, shone suddenly the evening star.

There, before the door, had stood the waiting wood-sled!

The girl caught through the gathering dusk a gleam of magenta from the corner of the clearing.

Two hermit thrushes, distant in the forest, began to send up their poignant antiphonal evening chant.